



Snow Ball
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Snow Ball by **thetaknight**

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Summary: It's winter, 1984, and the annual Snow Ball is coming up. Mike is trying to find Eleven before the ball - and so is Chief Hopper. Will is struggling with both the aftermath of his time in the Upside Down and the fact that he wants to bring a boy and not a girl to the dance. And Nancy's figuring out her feelings for Steve and Jonathan.

1. Chapter One

Hey guys! This is a story taking place the week leading up to the Snow Ball a year after Season 1. It's going to be pretty short - I have 8 chapters planned. Please give me feedback; constructive criticism is always appreciated and while I do have a basic plot planned out, I can incorporate some of your ideas. This is my first fanfiction here, so don't be too harsh! Anyways...enjoy!

"So..." Mike bit his lip and took a deep breath. His knees visibly shook and his nails were pushing half-moons into his palms. He wasn't really nervous, though, not at all. Just a good actor. That's what this was, all an act. But she didn't have to know that. "D-do you...wanna go to the Snow Ball together?"

Jennifer Hayes regarded him silently, her expression unreadable. She looked at him, up and down, as if she didn't see him every day at school. "Okay."

"R-really? Great!" Mike put on his giddiest smile. "That's - that's great. I can pick you up at seven next Friday, how does that sound?"

"Fine. Thanks, Mike." Her mouth curled up in the corners. "I'll see you tomorrow." She turned and walked away, her blonde hair swishing back and forth with each step. Mike watched her red backpack disappear down the hallway, then slung his own over his shoulder and went out to the parking lot. Lucas, Dustin, and Will were already waiting by the bike racks.

"So guess who just got a date for the Snow Ball?" Mike jabbed his thumb toward his chest. "Jennifer Hayes."

"Jennifer Hayes? I thought she was madly in love with Will. Did you see her crying at his funeral?" Dustin propped his foot up on the pedaland started down the road.

Will was silent for a moment as they all followed. Then he said quietly, "What about Eleven?" He had never met the girl who'd saved his life, but he'd heard all about her – from Lucas, about her unnatural powers; from Dustin, about the sacrifice she'd made to

banish the monster that Will was all too familiar with; and from Mike, about her love of Eggos and her tragic past and how pretty she was. Mike hadn't stopped thinking about her for a month – and now he was going to the Snow Ball with Jennifer Hayes?

"I figure it's time to move on," Mike replied. "She's not coming back. I get that now."

The other three exchanged looks before they moved onto the sidewalk, their wheels popping up onto the cement. They were silent until they reached the intersection where they had to break off.

"Okay. You guys go finish your homework, and then you're sleeping over, right?" Mike called as Dustin and Will turned left and started toward their houses.

"Right. See you," Dustin yelled back.

Lucas and Mike went on for a little while until their paths diverged. With a hasty "bye", Lucas disappeared behind his house. Mike stood up on his pedals and pumped his legs harder, the air whipping by faster with each turn of the wheels. He had to go home and work on finding El.

He was breathless by the time he reached his house, propped his bike up against a wall in the garage, and raced up the stairs to his bedroom. He grabbed his walkie-talkie from under the bed and thundered back down two flights of stairs to the basement.

El's blanket fort was still there, the blankets drooping and the whole structure tilting towards the floor. An empty Eggo box lay squashed inside it, and the Millennium Falcon sat beside it, looking lost. Mike's breath caught in his chest as he knelt down and turned the walkie-talkie on, the knob already turned to the right channel.

"El? It's me."

Silence for a while. Then a growl. Breathing – definitely El's.

"I know you can't hear me, Eleven. I'm sorry. But I'm coming to get you, okay? I'm going to keep trying. I'll find you. We can go to the Snow Ball together. You really have to come back before then,

because I asked Jennifer Hayes so my parents and the guys will think I'm moving on. They don't believe you're alive. Anyway, if I don't find you I'll have to go with her. But don't worry. I'll find you.

The growl got louder and louder until it became a deafening roar, and the ragged breathing broke into a scream.

Mike turned the walkie-talkie off. God, he was scared.

He pushed a puff of air from his lips and blinked a tear from his eye.

"I'll find you," he repeated, even though there was no one there to hear it but the empty blanket fort. "I'll find you."

So...there it is. I hope you enjoyed it! I hope everything makes sense - let me know if anything is off. Please review. I know it's not perfect, and I'd love to hear what you guys want me to change or add for the next chapter, which will be about the sleepover. It won't be a very intense one, but it'll give me a chance to have some fun with the characters! Also, is this a good length for a chapter or would you prefer longer?

2. Chapter Two

Hey! I'm back! Thanks to salavibes and Bambi1345 for your reviews, they made me really happy ^w^ Also, disclaimer: I don't own Stranger Things. (If I did, I'd be writing actual Stranger Things and not fanfiction of it.)

Dustin took a quick glance at the blanket fort as he carried his backpack into the basement, then averted his eyes. It had been a whole year since Eleven had sat in it, and still, Mike kept it up. The other boys had tried to convince him otherwise at first, but to no avail, and they'd eventually given up talking about it. Mike might say he was moving on, but Dustin wasn't buying it.

Dungeons & Dragons lay out on the table from their last campaign, which had taken two weeks to plan and sixteen hours to finish. A deflated air mattress and a sleeping bag had been put out beside the couches. The boys plopped their things on their established sleeping spots - Mike and Dustin on the couches, Lucas on the sleeping bag (it was technically his, but he never used it except for sleepovers at Mike's), and Will on the mattress (everyone else hated it, but he liked the way it wobbled back and forth).

"So...wanna put on a movie?" Lucas suggested. The others sighed. They'd watched everything Mike had at least fifteen times - and as much as they liked *The Empire Strikes Back*, fifteen times was probably enough.

"Nah," said Mike. "Pizza's getting here any minute."

Soon they were sitting in the middle of the basement with two pizzas between them. It was winter, and already dark outside, and the room was lit weakly yellow by a couple of floor lamps.

"I think I just died and went to heaven," Dustin murmured with his mouth full.

"I think you're a little too enthusiastic about food," Lucas muttered under his breath. Mike and Will snorted, and Dustin's eyebrows crinkled in indignation as he reached for another slice.

"So do you guys have dates for the Snow Ball?" Mike asked.

Silence.

"Oh. No? Well, that's too bad." Mike didn't say anything else, but his judgment was evident.

Dustin scoffed. "Yeah, we get it. You got a girl to say yes to you. Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are." He smirked. Then, his face changed to something more contemplative. "Actually, there was someone I was thinking of asking. Max."

Lucas looked caught off guard. "Max? Red hair, in our English class? Skateboard?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Oh. Uh, nothing." Lucas kept his eyes down, fiddling with the sleeve of his shirt. "When are you going to ask her?"

"Monday, probably. At lunch, after English."

"Oh. Okay."

They fell quiet for a while, each trying to figure the other one out.

Dustin had liked Max ever since she'd showed up at Hawkins Middle School, and he didn't think it had been a secret. He made extra effort to sit beside her at lunch, and although he never talked much about her out loud, he thought Lucas knew. Had he liked her too, all this time? Did he think he could ask her to the dance before Dustin did?

Lucas, on the other hand, was completely taken by surprise. He'd also had a crush on Max from the beginning - she was tough, but playful too, and she seemed different from the rest of the girls. But he'd never thought to act on his feelings. A girl like her saw a boy like him as a friend, he thought, nothing else. But now that Dustin was chasing after her, Lucas was reconsidering.

It was Mike who broke the silence eventually. "What about you, Will? Do you like anyone?" Dustin and Lucas relaxed a little, turning towards Will. They would deal with The Max Situation later.

"Uh..." His eyes darted around the room and pink started showing in his cheeks. "Yeah, sure. There's a girl."

"Really?" Mike asked, eyes wide as he, Lucas, and Dustin leaned in eagerly. "Who?"

Will's mind raced, trying to think of a girl from school. His mind went blank. His heart raced and his palms sweated. Crap. A girl...he couldn't even think of a girl name. "Um...Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane Smith." He got up and bolted to the bathroom.

When they heard the door close, the others let out quiet giggles. "Sarah Jane Smith? Like *Doctor Who*? He can't lie to save his life."

"I kind of feel bad for him. Hey Will!" Dustin called. "It's okay! Don't feel bad that you're not a girl magnet like me!" Mike looked at him, one eyebrow arched, and Lucas laughed. "What?"

Will leaned against the door and tried to steady his breathing. *Shit*. Why did he have to freak out like that? He should've just said there was no one. How was he going to explain it - the *Doctor Who* name and his need to escape?

He'd been sure for a while that he didn't like girls. Well, he liked them; he liked cruising down the street with Max and Eleven sounded pretty cool too. But he didn't want to hold a girl's hand or plant a kiss on her lips. He didn't want to bring one to the Snow Ball. He wanted to bring a boy.

Jonathan would be fine with it, and his mom would be too; and as for his father, he'd never accept anything about Will anyway. It was Mike, Dustin, and Lucas that he was worried about. They were nice, of course, and Will certainly hoped they'd like him no matter what, but was it a chance worth taking? Was taking Ryan Lopez to the Snow Ball and getting to stop pretending he was something he wasn't worth losing his three best friends?

Suddenly, Will felt something pull tight in his stomach. He staggered to the sink and gagged.

Shit.

It was another slug, blackish-green and clearly belonging in a darker dimension. Will gripped the edge of the sink and braced himself for what he knew would come next.

All the heat in the bathroom was replaced with freezing cold, and dark, snakelike tendrils crept across the walls. The light flickered and then went out. Will was back in the Upside Down. Translucent yellow eggs lay on the floor, broken open and leaking slime. White particles drifted slowly from the ceiling.

Memories flooded back - memories of being crouched in the corner of Castle Byers. Cold, hungry, and terrified for his life. Screaming through the wall when he heard his mother calling. A menacing growl coming closer and closer until it reached him.

As soon as it had appeared, the Upside Down vanished. The light flickered back on and Will saw his own reflection, shaken and shaking, in the mirror.

He turned on the tap and splashed cold water onto his face, dried it, and walked back like nothing had happened. He sat calmly down between Lucas and Mike.

"Are you okay, Byers?" Dustin said, closing the last empty pizza box and tossing it aside. "I was just joking earlier. We all know I'm not much of a girl magnet." (Mike laughed and Lucas looked down at the floor.) "And you really don't need to feel bad about not having a date for the dance. It's just the stupid Snow Ball."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Will nodded. "I'm bored. Let's put on *The Empire Strikes Back*."

Whew! Two chapters down, six to go. Let me know what you think! Unfortunately, I'll be away for a while and you probably won't be able to expect another chapter for at least two weeks. I am pretty excited about the next chapter though...it involves Eleven and Hopper, so look forward to that!

3. Chapter Three

Hi again! You'll still have to wait a couple weeks to see Eleven, but here's a short mini-chapter for until then.

"You know you don't have to do that anymore," Nancy said, arms crossed and regarding Steve with amusement. "My parents know about us now."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He tried to lift his other leg over the windowsill, but he was stuck. He grunted as he extricated the rest of his body from the window. "But it is *sooo* badass. I mean, tell me my ninja moves don't turn you on."

Nancy snorted. "You're ridiculous. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yep." Steve pushed the window closed and disappeared. Nancy heard a thump and a couple of muttered swears from below.

What an idiot, she thought as she closed the curtains, turned off the light, and got into bed. *At least he's my idiot.*

She and Steve had been together for just over a year, and they were happy. He'd changed a lot since last November. He'd stopped hanging out with Carol and Tommy, for one. He'd helped her heal after losing Barb. He'd made peace with Jonathan (fighting a monster from another dimension together, it seemed, was a pretty good way to bond).

Jonathan.

Now that was a whole other issue.

She really did like Steve. She liked his smile and his laugh and his arm around her at the theatre with the light of the screen on their faces. She liked that he was good with her siblings - building snow forts for Holly to sit inside and play until he made her come in from the cold, arguing about movies and video games with Mike. She liked that her parents liked him now. And she liked his hair, of course.

She just wasn't sure if she loved him.

Maybe she had at first. But that was right after Barb had died, Will had gone missing and come back, and Eleven had saved them all from the Demogorgon. She hadn't been in the mood to take anything for granted. It had been easier to cling to Steve and push thoughts of Jonathan out of her head.

But lately, she'd been thinking of him more and more, and it was getting harder and harder to ignore. Every time she looked at him, she thought of the two of them lying in her bed, him having just pulled her out of the Upside Down. Her hair wet and her mind racing with what she'd just seen. Neither of them quite sure what to say. Maybe there was something between them that night. Maybe there'd been a spark, and maybe it could still be fanned into a flame.

She couldn't leave Steve for him - she didn't want to. But she also couldn't do nothing.

There was a dance next Friday - the stupid Snow Ball. There was one at the middle school and one at the high school on the same night. In high school, though, no one really cared anymore. There were bowls of sugary punch and paper snowflakes hung up on the windows and parent chaperones that would watch and make sure no one spiked the punch or got too affectionate with their significant other. It was pretty lame.

Maybe she could ask Jonathan. Tell him how she felt, see if he felt the same. Go dance under flashing lights in the gym, drink gross punch, and find out where they stood. Tell Steve they were going as friends.

She was starting to drift off, and a voice inside her head reminded her that the ideas she came up with when she was tired were rarely good. She ignored it and slipped off into a dream of Jonathan, one hand clasping hers and the other on her hip, slow dancing as the cheap lights and the paper snowflakes whirled around them.

Hope you guys liked that...thanks for your reviews on the last chapter, and I'd love it if you reviewed this one too! See you soon!

4. Chapter Four

Hey guys! Sorry for the long wait. I was away for a while, and when I came back and wrote more, it didn't save properly. Ugh. Thanks for being patient. Also, a little heads-up: I'm using some ideas from Season 2, but this story is not necessarily supposed to be my imagining of it. It's really just about what happens leading up to the Snow Ball, and there just happen to be some season 2 elements in there, but I won't be dealing with a lot of the events foreshadowed for it, if that makes any sense. Just thought I should clear that up for you guys! Anyway, I'll shut up now. Enjoy!

Mmm. Flour, buttermilk, sugar. Poured into a giant factory waffle-iron that could make a hundred at a time, frozen, and packaged in a cardboard box with a red cursive logo. Maybe she'd get sick of them one day, but today was not it.

After she'd savoured the Eggo for a moment, she uncrumpled the pale yellow sticky note that had come with it in the wooden box. She'd learned to read a little bit in the lab, but she still had to pause and sound out the less familiar words of the messy scrawl.

11 -

Hope you're well. I'm working on a way to get you out of there. Enjoy the waffles and stay safe.

Jim

The Chief of Police had been leaving her Eggos and occasionally notes for over a year now - she had an approximate measure of time from the expiry dates on the waffle boxes. (It probably wasn't healthy to live solely on frozen waffles for a year, but they were delicious and she was still alive.) She'd only met Hopper a couple of times, and they'd never really gotten to get to know each other. He'd seemed nice, though, and now he was trying to get her out of the Upside Down.

As far as she knew, it wasn't possible.

After her mother's involvement in Project MKUltra, Eleven had been born with a unique brain. Her mind had incredible power, and while that meant she could flip trucks, crush cans, and travel to people and places from a sensory deprivation tank, it also had a few less fortunate consequences.

Every child has a few dark places in their mind. For most children, they show themselves through nightmares and night terrors and the occasional tantrum. But Eleven's fear and anger and hurt (plentiful to begin with) were amplified by her super-charged brain, and they manifested as something physical: the Upside Down. And the Demogorgon.

The monster was like a part of her. There was a sort of balance between them; when they had touched, it ripped a hole between the worlds, and in the end only she had been able to destroy it for good. But now that one half of that balance had been blasted into dust, she was trapped. She'd be in the Upside Down until the day she died - lonely, empty, and cold, with nothing to do but sleep, lie awake thinking on the floor of Castle Byers, and wait for the next Eggo delivery.

But still, there was a tiny, optimistic voice inside her head. She tried not to listen to it, but sometimes when there was nothing else to think about, she imagined seeing Mike's face widening into a smile as she pushed through the door, both of them breaking into a run for each other's arms. She thought about learning to play D&D and playing long into the night with the boys. She thought about all the things she had to say when she got back:

Thank you. To Joyce, for making her feel like she had a mother again. To Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, for protecting her, caring for her, and being the best friends she'd known for a while. To Hopper, for keeping her alive. Oh, and to Nancy for the dress, even if she hadn't known it at the time.

I missed you. To everyone, but mostly to Mike. And she did; she missed him so much it physically hurt. She missed his eyes and his smile. She missed how compassionate and caring he was, and how he always stood by her.

I'm sorry. To Will, and everyone who loved him. She wasn't sure exactly how the Upside Down worked, but she did know that after seven days in this nightmare world - *her* nightmare world - he'd never be the same.

She squashed her thoughts back down again. She wasn't going to let herself get her hopes up, not when what she'd wanted had been taken from her so many times before. *I'm going to be here forever*, she reminded herself as she closed her eyes and let the cold, white-flecked Upside Down air brush over her face.

Jim Hopper closed the car door and looked out the window to the forest, the sunlight starting to fade from the tips of the trees. Why did he keep doing this? He wasn't entirely sure if she was alive where she was, or if a fox or a rabbit was the one eating the Eggos from the box.

It was for the same reason gone to such lengths to find Will. It was because of Sara. After losing her - after seeing Joyce break down and realizing he'd done the same thing - he couldn't help it. No child would be lost on his watch.

Eleven reminded him of Sara, too. Both kept the same childlike wonder even after facing monsters, whether that had been a scientist, an incurable disease, or a literal monster. Both were fierce, fighting until the last second. And every time Jim looked at El, with her skinny frame and her shaved head, he couldn't help seeing his daughter.

So he was going to find a way to bring her back. To give her a normal life with people who loved her for more than the fact that she could crush cans with her mind.

He wasn't sure how yet, but he was getting close. He was still working with the Department of Energy to clean up the mess from what happened. Finding cover stories for what happened to Will, getting funding to fix the broken buildings, and acting as a link between the Department and everyone else involved. And he thought he could gain access to all of the equipment in the labs - generate enough energy to open another gate. He didn't have to worry about the Demogorgon anymore - Eleven could just walk out.

That was the plan, anyway.

Jim pressed the gas pedal down and started taking off down Mirkwood. *Soon*, he hoped. Soon.

Sorry there wasn't much action in this chapter. Hopefully it was still interesting? Let me know. Reviews are appreciated very much. See you soon!

5. Chapter Five

Rain started to drip from the clouds hanging above Mirkwood, and Mike reached back to pull up his hood. The rain started to fall harder, and he had to squint to see the road in front of him. It was empty. Good. No one to see him, no one to know what he was trying to do.

In his backpack there was a walkie-talkie, a compass (hopefully Dustin wouldn't miss it), and a map. He was wearing wet sneakers and a dark red raincoat (he'd outgrown the one he'd worn in the forest last year when he found El). He was freezing, but he focused on the empty road in front of him and the sounds of the rain, his breathing, and his bike wheels against the wet asphalt...until he was distracted by the bright headlights and the growl of the Chevy coming up the road towards him.

It slowed as it pulled up, and Mike did too, taking his foot off the pedal and pushing the kickstand down. The window rolled down.

"Mike!" The Chief of Police yelled over the rain, which by now was drumming hard against the road and the roof of the car in big, fat droplets. "What are you doing here without your nerd friends?"

"Nothing," Mike replied. "Just looking for something I lost. What about you?"

"Mind your own business, kid." Then Hopper's face changed as realization dawned, his eyebrows crinkling and his mouth dropping open a little. "Wait. You're not doing what I think you're doing, are you?"

"What?"

"Looking for Eleven. *Are* you?"

Mike looked down, bracing himself for a lecture. He hadn't told anyone else what he was doing, but he'd heard plenty just the same about how he had to let go of El. How it was over. How she'd sacrificed her life for them and she was gone, and all he could do now was remember her.

Instead, Hopper leaned in and lowered his voice (purely out of habit, since they were the only ones there and no one would be able to hear them over the rain anyway). "Listen, I am too. And I think I'm getting close. But I think you should stay out of it, okay? I don't think it's dangerous, but you never know."

"I've been looking for her for a year," Mike said through gritted teeth. "And I'm fine. Leave me alone."

"No, seriously, Mike. You don't worry. I told you, I'm getting close - just let me find her. You go home, relax a little. Start getting ready for the Snow Ball."

"But I need Eleven for the Snow Ball!"

"I'll take care of that part. Find something nice to wear, get something to give her. I'll get her back in time."

Mike bit his lip. He had to admit, he wasn't making much progress in finding El. He was aimlessly talking into his Supercom, with no idea if she could even hear him. He was riding alone to the forest even though he knew in the back of his mind he wouldn't find her there, just like he hadn't been able to find her anywhere else. And he was pretty sure he wasn't using the compass right. It seemed like Chief Hopper was his only choice.

He sighed reluctantly. "Promise?"

"Yeah," Hopper said. "Promise. Now go home and change into something dry."

The bell rang. "Yesssss!" Dustin hissed, pumping his fist, slinging one backpack strap over his shoulder and getting up to leave. Lucas picked up his books and went to the front to talk to the teacher. Mike snapped himself out of that trance-like daze he seemed to be in so often lately.

Will closed his binder and stuffed it in his backpack. Giving a quick wave and a "thank you" to the teacher, he walked out the door, where Dustin waited, leaning against the wall.

"Finally. When are those two slowpokes going to get out so we can have lunch?" He sighed.

"Dustin, it's been less than a minute," Will said, eliciting another sigh and an exasperated eye-roll. "And actually...I was thinking I might sit with Ryan today, if that's okay."

For a second, Dustin looked a tiny bit hurt, the way he always did when Will hung out with Ryan. The four of them had been eating lunch together since fourth grade (partially on account of the fact that none of them had many other friends). He got over it quickly, though, and his face sprung back into a smile. "Yeah, sure. Of course! Now where the hell are Lucas and Mike..."

"Thanks," Will nodded, trying to suppress a grin at how excited he was to see Ryan. He headed to the cafeteria and started searching for him. Maybe he hadn't gotten out of class yet - he had to talk to the teacher, he'd gotten detention, whatever.

Oh, there he was. Bright, amber-coloured eyes, messy black hair, making Will feel like it was butterflies in his stomach and not something a lot less pleasant.

"Hey," Will said. "How's your morning been?"

"Um, good." Ryan joined his path with Will's and they kept walking. "Hey, there's something that I need to talk to you about."

When they sat down at the end of table with their trays full of food, he kept going.

"Listen...I really like you. And the Snow Ball's in a few days, and I know it's a little last-minute, but I was thinking we could go together, maybe?" He looked almost scared as he waited for an answer, like he was bracing himself for the worst.

"What? Yeah, of course! I was gonna go with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, but you can come too."

"No, not like that." Ryan looked uncomfortable, and Will was starting to too as he realized what Ryan meant. "I think we should go as, you know, boyfriends. I don't know, *are* we boyfriends? But if we're going

to do that - if you want to - well, I think you should tell your family and your friends you're gay."

Will looked around, panicked, to see if anyone was listening to them. Everyone seemed absorbed in their own conversations - including his friends. Max sat in the spot that he normally took, animatedly telling a story. Mike was staring off into space. Lucas and Dustin were both staring at Max.

"No. I'm sorry." He turned back to Ryan, furiously red. "I'm not ashamed of you, or anything. But I really don't think they'd be okay with it. Well, I don't know. But I can't - you don't - they're my only friends and my family. Besides you, I mean. And maybe I'll come out later. But not yet. Okay? I'm sorry."

"Oh." Ryan's face fell. "Okay. So...no Snow Ball then."

"No, you can come with me and - oh, God, I'm really sorry about the thing. Come with my friends."

"No, that's okay." Ryan picked up his tray and refused to make eye contact. "Just think about it, okay?"

He walked away, leaving Will shell-shocked. Ryan was pissed at him, he was terrified to come out, Max was sitting in his spot - and as the bell for the end of lunch rang, he realized he hadn't even gotten to eat his chocolate pudding.

Hey, hope you liked that! Quick note to address a review from a couple chapters back: While Will's sexuality is not established in the show, it has been hinted at and I thought it would be an interesting storyline to explore. Thanks for reading, please keep reviewing, and see you soon!

6. Chapter Six

The door to the darkroom swung open silently, and Jonathan, deep in enlarging a photo, didn't notice Nancy until she sat next to him and cleared her throat. He looked up, not sure what to say, trying to figure out why she was there. Was everything alright with Steve? Had the three of them had plans for lunch that he'd forgotten? Was it something to do with Barb, maybe, and everything that had happened last year?

He realized he'd been staring for a while without saying anything. "Hey, Nancy." He turned back to the photo as he kept talking. "What, uh, brings you here today?"

"Umm..." She looked down, crossing her arms. "I wanted to talk." She gestured toward the stool beside Jonathan's. "Can I sit?"

He nodded.

"So...listen. You know me and Steve are happy. I mean, we're good. You know that. And..."

She watched him as he lifted the photo out of a bath of water and pinned it up to the wall alongside four others. He still loved photography, although thankfully he didn't take pictures of girls undressing anymore. He took pictures of his family - standing in front of the Christmas tree, toasting at New Year's, sitting outside on a picnic blanket. He had ones of Nancy, too - laughing in the sun one afternoon at the beach, sitting under a tree after school, leaning on Steve's shoulder at the café. He had pictures of everywhere he'd been and everything he'd seen and thought was beautiful.

"I was thinking...last year, we didn't really get to know each other under the best of circumstances."

"Yeah, no kidding."

"And that night after you - after you saved me from that awful place, and we were lying in my bed together. I've been thinking about that. Because we were a little preoccupied what with your brother, and -

and Barb, and the monster hunting - "

Jonathan smiled a little at the phrase. He looked so perfect right now, with the dim red light falling over his face, biting his lip in focus. He seemed partly here, but also partly in a different world. It comforted Nancy that he wasn't focused only on her. The fact that at least half of his attention was diverted to his pictures lessened the pressure a bit.

"Because we were a little preoccupied, I guess we didn't really think about, I don't know, *romantic* possibilities." She cringed as soon as the words escaped her mouth. "At least I didn't. But lately, I keep - I think - I - " She sighed and forced it out. "Maybe we could have been something."

Jonathan snorted.

"Shit, I didn't...I'm sorry." Nancy's cheeks flooded hot, bright red to match the darkroom lights. She'd convinced herself that maybe, *maybe* telling him about her feelings was the right idea, that he liked her too, that they could have something, *be* something. But here he was, laughing. "I guess you don't feel the same way, huh?"

"No, no, it's not that. Nancy, please, don't take it the wrong way." He properly turned away from his photos for the first time. "You were saying that you didn't think about us like that on that night. But I did. I was thinking it right away, and I've been trying to stop thinking about it ever since then for you and Steve's sakes."

The flicker of hope inside Nancy flashed back to life as quickly as it had died. "Oh, ok. So we're...on the same page then, I guess. Why don't we go to the Snow Ball, then? I know it's stupid, but we can dance, spend some time just the two of us. I'll tell Steve we're going as friends."

Jonathan turned away again, shaking his head.

"No. You and Steve are happy. I'm not messing with that."

"Don't worry about Steve. We'll figure that out later. He doesn't even have to know."

"No, you're not cheating on him. Definitely not with me. You're not going to do that to him or to yourself. You are beautiful, Nancy, and maybe under other circumstances I - no, never mind. Just forget it. We weren't meant to be together."

Nancy could feel hot tears pooling in her eyes. She tried to fight them, willing them to flow back into her tear ducts and disappear, but they splashed over her eyelids onto her cheeks. *Damnit*, she thought, turning to wipe them away. Maybe he didn't see.

"I'm really sorry, Nancy. I...it wasn't meant to be."

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine. I'm sorry for putting you in that position." Nancy got up, pushing the stool in with a quiet squeak, and made for the door. Her teeth and fists were clenched in anger - mostly at her own idiocy, but also at Jonathan for refusing to go along with it - but she tried to keep her voice steady. "I'll see you later. Have a good night."

The door slammed this time, leaving Jonathan alone with the quiet splash of photos in baths, the peaceful but slightly foreboding red lamps, and the emptiness that Nancy had left behind.

"Hey, Dustin, are you there? Over." Lucas's fuzzy voice sounded from the supercom, breaking Dustin's focus while he memorized lines for his next drama club performance. Dustin picked it up and threw it across the room, then continued to murmur lines to himself.

"I know you're there. Dustin Dustin Dustin Dustin Dustin..."

Dustin let out a little scream of exasperation and reached for the walkie talkie. "For God's sake, Lucas. I'm busy. Bother me later. Over."

"You, busy? With what? Playing with your action figures? Organizing your snacks by calorie count? Over."

"It's for drama club. If you were actually planning on telling me something important, please tell me so I can go back to it. Over."

"Okay, okay. Calm down. I just wanted to tell you, you're not asking Max to the dance. I am. Over."

Dustin dropped his script. "Sorry, what? Who said you could do that? Over."

"I did. I'm asking Max to the dance. Unless you think you're more worthy, in which case you'll have to prove it. Over."

"Oh," Dustin said, having completely forgotten about his drama stuff by now. "It's on."

Hope you guys liked the chapter! Huge thank you to people who reviewed/followed/favourited. According to my original plan, there are two chapters to go, but depending on how things work out, I might have to add another one. We'll see how it goes. Anyway, see you soon! Have a great weekend!

7. Chapter Seven

Mike slid the knot of his tie beneath his chin. He tried to smile in the mirror. It didn't look very convincing.

In truth, he thought the whole thing was stupid - the suit, the fake smile, the little bunch of flowers he'd picked from the backyard. He never would've bothered, but if El was coming back he wanted to do everything properly, and give her the Snow Ball he'd promised her. But there was an hour until the ball and El *wasn't* coming.

Maybe he'd believed that she was for a while - riding back from the forest, confidently whispering "see you soon" into his walkie-talkie, finding a suit and picking the flowers. But now there was barely time left, and his faith in Chief Hopper had faded.

And everything that was meant for El was going to go to Jennifer Hayes. He didn't even particularly like her. He had nothing really *against* her, but she couldn't flip trucks with her mind, and she didn't eat Eggos still frozen. Her wrist was empty of the tattooed number 011, and although Mike really hated to hold this against her, she'd never blasted a monster into the underworld and saved his best friend.

What he meant to say was she wasn't Eleven. She wasn't the one who was supposed to get the flowers and the dance. So what was the point? Short of some kind of miracle, this dance was going to suck.

For the past three days, Dustin and Lucas had been trying to figure out who would ask Max to the Snow Ball. It had started with a heated argument over the phone about who was best suited to her in the first place, but neither could agree on who'd won. So they arm wrestled (Max would have beat them both), played cards, compared grades, and consulted Mike and Will at length (each refused to give an opinion but found the whole situation highly amusing).

Each battle ended either in a tie or the loser demanding a rematch, and another, and another. But it wasn't until now, an hour before the Ball, that they realized their system had a serious flaw.

"Lucas - we have an hour until the dance. And neither of us has asked Max out! She doesn't even know we want to go with her."

Lucas dropped his basketball onto the pavement, letting it bounce away from their free-throw competition. "And we still have no idea which of us is going to ask her!"

"Okay, um...how about we both ask her? She's probably going with her friends. We can each ask her to dance when we get there...and see who she says yes to."

"I guess it's our only option. Let's go get ready." Lucas grabbed the basketball and started for his house.

"Wait. Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Whatever happens tonight...we're still friends, right?"

"Yes. Well, probably. Well, maybe." Lucas punched Dustin lightly on the shoulder. "Of course."

Nancy zipped up the back of her violet party dress. Then she brushed her hair behind her ears and pushed two purple crystal studs into the holes in her earlobes. It was just a stupid high school dance, but it was fun to get dressed up.

She, Steve, and Jonathan had decided to go to the Snow Ball just for the hell of it. They could make fun of how pathetic it was and maybe catch a movie afterwards. Jonathan hadn't loved the idea, but Steve had teasingly insisted they couldn't go anywhere without their favourite third wheel, and he'd given in.

It hadn't been easy, the last few days, to look at him. Not that it had been before, when she'd been pining over whether she should make a move, but it was even worse now that she had. Now that he knew how she felt. Every time they made eye contact, he looked away uncomfortably. She could feel him pulling away from her.

It wasn't easy to look at Steve, either. She felt awful. He was so

sweet, and so protective of her, and she wished she could love him and him only. It didn't seem fair to him that she couldn't just choose him and be done with it.

But still, she was going to go to the dance and smile and pretend everything was just perfect. She was going to slow-dance with Steve as if there was no one else on her mind and laugh with Jonathan like he was just her friend and she didn't want him to be anything else. She pounded this into her brain over and over again as she forced her lips into a smile and went downstairs.

Hopper could hear an electric hum as he walked past the room, and the air felt staticky. That was the one.

"Excuse me," he began, addressing the bald, tired-looking man who stood in front of the door. "Dr. Owens wants me in there. Jim Hopper, Chief of Police."

The man was clearly exhausted from guarding the room for who knows how long, and took a second to understand, furrowing his brow. "Sorry, uh...Dr. Owens isn't in there. No one's in there right now, actually."

"Perfect." The man's expression became even more confused for a second before he processed Hopper's fist flying toward him at an alarming velocity. It hit the side of his head, effectively knocking him unconscious and to the ground.

Maybe this whole punching-people thing was a tad excessive and unnecessary, and there was probably an easier, less violent way to get where he wanted to go...but hey, it was fun, and it felt badass.

Hopper knelt down, unclipped the card from the man's belt, and held it up to the black box on the door, eliciting a click and the flashing of a green light. He swung the door open and the lights in the room flickered on.

Generators, magnets, and unidentifiable, button-studded masses of metal filled the room, some of them humming, beeping, and flashing. A pair of thick rubber gloves lay across one of them, and Hopper had

the sense to put them on before he set to turning everything on that wasn't already. He didn't know what most of them were, and it briefly occurred to him that he might be putting himself in danger. But it was for a little girl in a bad situation, and who was there to miss him if he was gone, anyway?

Will got into the passenger seat beside his mom and slammed the car door.

"Everyone ready to go?" Joyce asked, looking back to see if Lucas and Dustin had their seatbelts on. "You boys look so handsome. Maybe we should take another picture before we go - "

"Between you and Jonathan, I think we're fine," Will reassured her. "Let's go."

The Ford Pinto rolled down the driveway and onto the road. Dustin took an X-Men comic from the seat pocket and started flipping through it, while Lucas stared out the window.

"So, none of you found a date for the dance?" Joyce teased. All three of them shrugged, saying nothing. Joyce went quiet, having thought they'd laugh along, and turned the radio up loud so that Prince and Michael Jackson could fill the awkward silence.

Will wasn't sure where the Asking Max to the Snow Ball Situation was at at the moment, and while a day ago he would have enjoyed laughing at Dustin and Lucas's rivalry, right now he was a little preoccupied. He was happy to be going to the dance with his best friends (minus Mike), but he kept thinking about Ryan.

He'd gotten a call from him yesterday trying to convince him to come out.

"Look, I'm okay with you taking this at your own pace if that's what you really want. But I just want you to know - I don't want you to have to hide who you are. And if your friends and your family aren't okay with who you are, well, who needs them? Think about it. See you later."

Didn't he get it? Even if they weren't okay with him being gay, even

if they hated him for it, he couldn't just cut them out of his life. Partly because he was thirteen and it would logistically be pretty hard, but also because he cared about them so much. So if they couldn't accept him for who he was, what could he do? He was terrified of it.

They pulled up to the school and Will tried to push thoughts of Ryan out of his head - but they stayed there, somewhere hidden in a corner.

It was easy to lose track of time in the Upside Down.

In between checking the box for Eggos and notes, that was mostly what Eleven did. She lay somewhere sheltered - usually Castle Byers, which was a little tattered but made her feel safe - and closed her eyes, drifting in and out of sleep. Sometimes, when she felt restless, she ran through the vast expanse of the shadow vale, taking some small comfort in familiar places like Mike's house and the middle school. But usually she just lay there and let her mind wander.

That was what she was doing now. After a while, lost in her thoughts, everything around her faded away. She stopped hearing the constant, thrumming *whoosh* of the Upside Down and forgot the sensation of the slimy ground beneath her. Her eyelids blocked out what very little light there was. Everything was empty, and black, and quiet...

She opened her eyes, and it was still black. The floor was wet, and she stood up. There was music coming from somewhere, and the roar of a motor. She turned her head to find the source of the noise, but she didn't have to do much looking.

Joyce's car passed close in front of her. Joyce - Eleven swelled with warmth, remembering the comfort and compassion that Joyce had shown her. Compassion that she hadn't received in so, so long.

Will was in the passenger's seat, quiet. He looked better than the last time she'd seen him - less pale, and thin, less of a shell. Maybe he was alright after all.

Dustin sat in the back, nose buried in the final pages of a comic book.

El missed him. His sense of humour, his devotion to his friends, and the fact that he never forgot snacks (which El agreed were important, especially after using her powers).

Lucas sat next to him. El missed him, too. He hadn't liked her for a while, but she really didn't blame him. She'd appeared out of nowhere, a strange, quiet girl who could do unnatural things, and she'd misled him trying to find Will. But after they'd gotten to kind of know each other, he really wasn't that bad. He was smart and he stuck to his guns.

But Mike wasn't in the car. Where was he? She had to find him. He couldn't be far. Mike. She could see his face in her mind's eye. Did he look different now? Did he miss her? *Where are you?*

Suddenly, the car snapped out of sight and she was back lying on the ground in the Upside Down.

She'd never accessed the void from here before, and it was proving to be a lot harder than in a sensory deprivation tank. If she got too excited, if she got scared, she'd end up back here.

Well, she had an eternity to try. And she had to see Mike - not talk to him, but just see him. Just observe, invisible. She closed her eyes and tried to block everything out and plunge herself back into the darkness.

Hi! Hope you enjoyed this longish chapter (compared to my other ones, anyway). Sorry for the wait. Thanks for your reviews, it means a lot. See you soon!

Update (April 24): I'm so, so, sorry I haven't put out the next chapter yet. I've been pretty busy this week, and I don't have it fully written. I thought about splitting it into two chapters so you guys could have something to read today, but I thought it would be more effective as one chapter. I hope you understand. Hopefully I'll have it up within a few days, and after that there's going to be an epilogue! Sorry again for the wait. Thank you and bye!

8. Chapter Eight

Joyce rolled up to Hawkins Middle School. "Okay, I'll let you off here. Pick you up in two hours. Have fun, boys." She leaned over to kiss Will on the forehead.

"Love you, Mom."

"Thanks, Ms. Byers."

"See you."

The three boys pushed open the car doors and stepped out, wearing dress shirts and ties. They waved to Joyce, who waved back, and went in through the gym doors.

Paper snowflakes were taped to the walls and hanging on strings from the ceiling. Speakers were set up in each corner, and the DJ - someone's older brother, holding a Walkman - sat on a chair on the other side of the gym. Only a few kids had arrived, chatting in clusters or loitering by the snack table.

Mike and Jennifer were there, sitting on a couple of folding chairs in the corner. Mike didn't look at all interested in the conversation he was trying to keep up, and Jennifer could obviously tell. After a while, they both lapsed into silence. Mike saw Will, Lucas, and Dustin staring and gave them a glare as if to say, *What the hell are you looking at?* They all looked away guiltily.

Their attention was soon taken by Max, walking through the doors with four other girls. Will looked at Lucas and then Dustin, trying and mostly failing to hide his smile. They were both too busy staring at Max to notice.

She had traded in her usual t-shirt and jeans for a simple pale yellow dress. The sleeves fluttered around her shoulders, and the skirt rippled from her waist to just above her knees. Her long red hair swished around behind her as she made her way over to the three boys.

"Hey, guys. What's up?"

"Uh...nothing. We just got here." Dustin usually didn't get nervous around Max, but thinking about asking her to dance in an hour was freaking him out a little. Plus, she looked incredible.

"Where's Mike?"

Will nodded to the corner, where Mike and Jennifer were still sitting quietly, avoiding eye contact with each other and anyone else around.

"Ooh. That's pretty tragic." Max winced. She looked behind her for her other friends, who'd ventured over to the snack table. "You guys want to eat something?" She held her hands in a megaphone around her mouth and called over. "Hey, Lindsey! Are the Nilla wafers real?"

"I think so!"

"All right, let's go."

Chief Hopper was still in the lab, surrounded by buzzing, crackling, beeping machines. He'd gone around three times, combing for things he hadn't turned on yet. And still, nothing had happened.

What was he looking for, anyway? Was he expecting a portal to rip open in the wall? Eleven to appear standing before him? Maybe it had already worked and she was free. What if she was in the forest? Lost, alone, and probably starving. He left the machines on, but turned off the lights as he left the room, closing the door behind him. The guard was starting to come to, so Hopper took the liberty of knocking him out again.

He got into his car drove faster than was probably safe, finally pulling over on the side of Mirkwood. He looked out of the window and squinted into the forest, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Just the dark trees and the little wooden box on the ground.

He pushed the door open and ventured into the trees, breaking into a run. "Eleven!" He shouted, turning around in different directions, hoping his voice would carry to wherever she was. "ELEVEN!" He

walked deeper in. Rays of light from the low evening sun poked through the trees, but they began to disappear with each step.

"ELEVEN!"

It took about twenty minutes for him to realize that she wasn't there. It was just like the last time he'd been in the middle of the forest shouting a kid's name. It was futile. She was still in the Upside Down.

He made his way back to the car and pressed down hard on the gas pedal, biting his lip in frustration until it bled. He'd already failed her. He'd left her in that awful place that no child - hell, no human - should ever have to go, even after promising on yesterday's sticky note that he'd get her out soon. He'd failed Mike, too, left him on the night of the Snow Ball without the girl that he'd missed for a year and had finally thought he was getting back. And a voice inside his head told him that he'd failed Sara, too.

As soon as he arrived back at the lab, he stormed into every room he could find and looked for something, *anything*, to get Eleven back.

Back at the middle school, the lights were dimmed down and The Clash were blasting over the speakers. Mike and Jennifer danced awkwardly by the table, if you could call their half-hearted hip-wiggling and arm-flopping "dancing". The three other boys were dancing together too - Lucas was a surprisingly good dancer, while Dustin looked like he was having a seizure and Will self-consciously swayed back and forth, singing the lyrics.

The song ended and the DJ announced that the slow-dance was coming up. Dustin and Lucas exchanged looks and went to go find Max.

"So," Dustin yelled over the noise of the hundreds of kids packed into the gym, recapping his and Lucas's plan. "We'll find her and ask her to dance with one of us. And she can't pick both."

"Yeah," Lucas replied, his forehead creasing in disappointment. He sighed.

"What's wrong? You scared?"

"No. Dustin - you might want to look over there." He pointed over to where Max was sitting, without her group of friends. Instead, she was sitting next to a boy. And they were holding hands.

"Ugh, who is that?" Dustin said in disgust.

"Casey Conner. He's in my math class. He's..." Lucas sighed again. "He's pretty cool, actually."

They looked at each other, both feeling crushed.

"Hey, Dustin..." A smile crept onto Lucas's face. "Since neither of us seem to have a chance with Max...wanna dance?"

Will was planning to sit the slow dance out, and watch Dustin or Lucas dance with Max. But sitting on one of the folding chairs, waiting for them to return - one dancing with Max, the other sulking - his eyes wandered over to Ryan, standing alone against the wall. His heart accelerated and it was suddenly harder to breathe.

Just then, Dustin and Lucas twirled past in each other's arms, laughing hysterically, as "Stand By Me" started over the speakers. Will looked across the gym to see Max, swaying back and forth with another boy. Later, he was sure, he would appreciate the humour of the situation, but just now he had something else on his mind.

He'd missed his chance to slow-dance with Ryan, but there was always the next song. Glancing over again strengthened his resolve, and it was decided - he was going to ask him to dance. But he knew what he had to do first: tell his friends.

"Stand By Me" ended, and Dustin and Lucas stumbled over, out of breath. "Did you see us?"

"Yeah," Will smiled, forcing a laugh even though he felt like he was about to jump out of an airplane. "You were great. Hey, um...can I tell you guys something? Kind of, uh...personal?"

Dustin looked at Lucas, not sure what Will meant. "Sure. You can tell

us anything."

"Okay. Um, I - " His fingernails were digging into his palms. The words were right there, but they were so hard to say. "I wanted to tell you guys that I - "

Crap. Oh, crap.

His eyes widened and he suddenly ran, clamping his hand over his mouth and ducking out of the gym doors.

Eleven opened her eyes to find herself back in the void. She wanted to scream in happiness, to run until she found Mike, but she reminded herself to stay calm. She pictured Mike in her mind's eye, and there he was, standing beside a girl with long blonde hair. He'd gotten taller since El had last seen him, but then again so had she. He was wearing a suit, and El wondered what he was dressed up for.

Her attention shifted to the girl next to him. She was pretty, but she didn't look very happy to be there.

"Sorry I haven't been a very good Snow Ball date," Mike mumbled.

"That's fine. I haven't either." The girl stared at her feet.

El felt a pang of pain shoot through her. *Stay calm*, she thought again, and looked again at Mike's face. He looked miserable. She wanted to be there so, so badly...she was supposed to have been at last year's Snow Ball. She was supposed to be there now. She could touch Mike, let him see her, but he wouldn't understand that she wasn't really there, and never would be.

She walked a little ways away to see Lucas and Dustin again, looks of concern on their faces.

"What's up with him?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know. Let's give him a second and go see if he's okay."

El followed their worried gazes to where Will stood. He looked terrible, and it occurred to her that maybe he hadn't escaped the

Upside Down unscathed. He was deathly white, and the circles under his eyes looked so much worse now that the colour had drained from his cheeks.

For a moment, she thought she saw something flash in his eyes. Something wild and foreign - but at the same time, a little familiar. Then he bent over, coughing, and El instinctively reached out. As soon as they made contact, everything around Eleven disappeared, and a deafening roar filled her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut as gravity started to warp and she felt like the world was spinning around her.

Then the sound stopped abruptly and she was in the forest. Not the Upside Down forest, blue and black and empty, but the real forest. Green and smelling like life. She got up and ran down the road barefoot towards the school. A mile away, every machine in Hawkins Lab flickered and turned off, and Jim Hopper ran too.

For a few seconds, as he slammed the bathroom door behind him, Will's mind raced with thoughts of coming out to his friends and how he was going to explain why he'd run. They were soon replaced by images of the Upside Down, tilting and shifting around him. The wall of his house, stretching and breaking. His own terrified face in the shed, holding a gun and thinking desperately to himself, *cast fireball*. The visions distracted him from the way that, as he fell to his knees, there was a little delay, as if someone had tried to catch him but pulled away.

Then something else distracted him: the sensation of every bone in his body being stretched, of his muscles tearing and new ones emerging, of bony ridges pushing out of his head and growing around his face until he could see nothing but darkness. He wasn't even sure if he had eyes anymore. He barely noticed the slugs forcing their way up his throat. He clenched his teeth against the pain, until they started moving too, into a ring that he couldn't speak with.

Everything hurt, and he couldn't see the real world - only flashes of a place he never wanted to see again and moments he never wanted to relive. He could feel his grip on his consciousness slipping, as if his mind and his body - was it really his anymore? - were departing each

other, and then -

The Demogorgon reared its head, the last residual thoughts of *leave me alone* and *what's happening* and *Mom* draining away. It was hungry, and it tasted the air for blood. Nothing. But it detected something else - the presence of its counterpart, its arch-nemesis, the one who'd made this long, arduous process necessary in the first place...somewhere on this plane of existence, and getting closer every second.

Mike looked at his watch, trying to be discreet. As if Jennifer cared. Less than an hour left of this bullshit. Which he never for a second would have endured if he hadn't hoped that maybe, finally, he'd get to dance with Eleven again.

He glanced over at Lucas and Dustin. No Max (no surprises there, in his personal opinion). No Will, either. They exchanged a couple of words and made their way towards the doors. Mike stood up a little taller. Were they leaving early? Was there a chance he could leave with them?

Before they reached the door, someone burst through the doors. They were small, dirty, and wearing a mess of torn, stained fabric, but Mike saw her right away. Eleven.

Even from here, he could see she'd grown taller, and thinner too - his heart and stomach went icy cold thinking of her, starving, in the Upside Down, but they soon returned to warm and fluttery because *it's El, it's El, and I thought she was gone but holy shit she's here.*

He realized he'd forgotten to breathe and took in a gulp of air, pushing it out in an exhilarated sigh. He imagined her meeting his eyes, smiling, running towards him. Hugging him. Maybe another kiss?

She burst his bubble by barely noticing him, breathless and wild-eyed. The entire gym went quiet to look at her, except for the blaring, upbeat music that the DJ hastily turned down.

She took a second to collect herself.

"It's not safe."

In the dim lights of the Hawkins High School gym, only about ten other kids shuffled around the floor to a song that nobody knew. Nancy, Steve and Jonathan sat in the corner with plastic cups of punch. Nancy and Jonathan had been avoiding eye contact all night, and both were thoroughly uncomfortable.

"It's so lame, it's hard to make fun of." Steve deadpanned.

"Yeah, I know." Nancy leaned closer to Steve and rested her head on his shoulder. Was it lighter than usual? Was she pulling away from him a little? He couldn't quite tell.

The lady from the front office came into the gym, taking a moment to regard the pathetic-ness of everything happening. "Jonathan, Steve, Nancy? Someone wants to talk to you."

They followed her into the office, exchanging puzzled looks, where she held the phone out. Jonathan took it.

"Hello?...wait, what?" He lowered the phone and whispered to the other two, "It's Chief Hopper."

He put it back to his ear and kept listening. His jaw dropped open, his chest rising and falling faster and more visibly with every passing second. After a while, he snapped himself out of it and said in a shaky voice, "okay. We'll be right there."

He turned to Nancy and Steve eyes wide. "We need to go. The monster's back. Will, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas are in the building with it. And...El's back. She's there too. Nancy, we're going to need that baseball bat."

Hi! Sorry about the wait once again. Like I added last chapter, I've been super busy and writing has not been a huge priority. I hope the ending (although this isn't the *ending* ending, not yet) doesn't seem too predictable and that it makes sense. Epilogue to come! Thanks for putting up with me and my inconsistent uploads. See you soon - hopefully actually soon this time!

9. Chapter Nine

Hi! This was originally going to be told as a flashback in the epilogue, but I thought it deserved its own chapter.

Jonathan pushed through the gym doors, the knot of fear that had been gradually tightening itself on the drive to the school flaring and expanding. There it was, standing on his side of the gym as screaming students pushed each other over to get to the other end. His eyes darted around the room to see Lucas and Dustin, frozen in fear a few feet away from the monster, Mike backed up against the wall, and somehow, Eleven.

"Guys, I don't see Will," he muttered to Steve and Nancy, who stood behind him anxiously. "Where's Will?" He yelled. Dustin pointed to the door and he shoved Steve and Nancy aside, thundering down the halls. "Will!" He started to tear through the school, screaming Will's name, trying to ignore the thought that he might not be in the school or even in this dimension.

Eleven approached the Demogorgon, looking it straight in the face. She reached out with her mind, feeling the familiar darkness. It's mind was so like hers. Powerful, smart, and determined. But it lacked her empathy and everything that made her human. It was just shrewdness and spite and a thirst for blood and -

Wait. There was something else there, something she didn't recognize.

She sensed a person. Warmth, love, emotion. Desperate, helpless fear. She reached out to it, whatever it might be, hoping it would find her in the darkness and reach back.

Everything was dark. The floor was wet. Will stood, immediately holding his hands up in front of his face and breathing a sigh of relief that they were his again. He took a moment to recover from what had just happened, replaying it all in his mind until the intrusive images of the Upside Down cut into his thoughts again.

When they passed, he looked up to see a moving image suspended in front of him like a movie theatre screen. It jerked back and forth, like he was seeing through someone else's -

Oh. He was still the Demogorgon, or trapped inside it. But he could see what it saw: a girl in a torn-up pink dress and jacket, her shoulder-length hair dirty and tangled. Looking straight at the Demogorgon. Or at him. It felt like she was looking at him.

A voice sounded from all around him. The girl's voice, he thought, even though her mouth wasn't moving, a thin, angry line. "Hello? Who's there? I'm here. Who are you?"

"I'm here too!" He screamed at the screen. "I'm not the Demogorgon! I'm Will! Help me!"

The voice replied, "okay."

Tears started to stream down Eleven's face as she struggled to pull Will out of the Demogorgon's mind. She briefly thought that he should give her a break from saving him.

She could feel him coming closer, and his thoughts and memories started playing through her mind like a tape on fast-forward. Riding home at night and seeing the monster's silhouette standing in his way, running through the upside down, his pursuer fast behind him, quietly singing to himself to keep himself awake and sane. And then the last year - Dustin, Mike, Lucas, a red headed girl that El didn't know - and always those blackish, slimy slugs.

I did this to him, she thought. *I'm the reason he's trapped*. She felt even more like she owed it to him to save him, and she concentrated even harder.

From across the room, Mike watched her, terrified of the monster in the middle of the floor but also feeling a strong desire to run up and pull her away. The last time she'd faced off against it, he'd lost her for a year. He couldn't lose her again. But something kept him rooted to his spot, mesmerized by the intensity in her eyes and her

outstretched hand trembling with effort.

Dustin watched her too. He was realizing that last November had fucked things up a lot worse than he'd thought. *Save us, Eleven*, he thought as loud as he could. (Could she hear him? Was she psychic? Probably.) *Save us with your magical Jedi powers.*

Lucas held his breath as El stared the monster down. A little over a year ago, he'd be mad at her for bringing her weirdo powers and this nightmarish monster, which he was sure had something to do with her, back into his near-perfect world. But now he could do nothing but root for her.

Hopper had arrived too, and a nagging voice in the back of his head told him that he was the Chief of Police, for God's sake, and he should probably do something about the huge monster in the middle of the gym instead of leaving it to the small girl that he'd been trying to save from another dimension. But something made him trust her, and he stayed, pinned to the wall.

Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve had scaled the entire building, and now they hurtled back into the room just as Eleven suddenly relaxed, her body going from tense and strong to limp and exhausted. The petals of flesh around the monster's head started to shrink back, its entire body squeezed down and in, and its slimy, grey skin melted away. Jonathan realized that Will had been there, in the gym, the entire time.

Mike ran over from the other side of the gym, catching Eleven as she wobbled and her knees gave out. He wiped the tears gently from her face and held her head close to his chest. "I'm here," he whispered. "Don't worry. I'm here."

El nodded, shaking as the silent tears were replaced by uncontrollable sobs. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I missed you." She looked up at him, her eyes wide and wet, blood

starting to drip from her nostrils and ears.

"Yeah. Me too." He kissed her lightly on the forehead and helped her get back up.

He looked up to see Jonathan and Hopper picking an unconscious Will up and carrying him out. "We're taking him to the hospital." Dustin, Lucas, Steve, and Nancy followed, one of the teachers attempting to calm down the other students, trying and failing to explain what had happened and consoling a few that had burst into tears.

Mike turned back to El. "You think the hospital's going to be able to help him?"

She shook her head and pulled him into another hug, still crying. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Mike assured her, taking her hand as they followed the others outside. He pushed the corners of his mouth into a smile. While the warmth and happiness he felt for her return was genuine, he was having trouble concealing his dread for what lay ahead. "Will's going to be just fine. And hey - " He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed in return. " - you're back."

Hello! Thanks for reading. This chapter was not originally part of the plan, so I'm really sorry if it doesn't flow well or doesn't make sense. I just thought it was worth its own chapter, because explaining it as a flashback wasn't really working out. I hope you don't mind all the POV changes. Let me know what you think! and big thanks to everyone who's reviewed/followed/faved.

10. Epilogue

Jonathan watched Will, his frail chest rising up and down, his eyes closed. His arms lay beside him, pinning down the hospital blanket. He'd passed out for hours after he'd become himself again, and no one knew what to do except take him to the hospital, where they were sure no one would know what to do with them. But there were here now, and although the doctors had no idea what the whole story was, at least they were keeping him alive.

Jonathan felt like a failure for not being able to do more. A whole year had passed since Will had been in the Upside Down, and Jonathan hadn't noticed a thing. He'd actually *believed* his little brother when he'd smiled and said he was okay. He'd thought all Will needed to get better was a few hours of listening to music on his bed, a few weekends over at Mike's playing D&D. He thought it was the stomach flu that Will had had on and off all year. He'd thought he was doing everything right, when he wasn't doing anything at all.

He thought that maybe if now, when he half-knew what was going on, he might be able to make up for it by doing everything possible. Skipping school and taking extra shifts at the convenience store so that Joyce could stay at the hospital, and spending every other hour there with her and Will.

Joyce walked in with a tray of food and set it on the table.

"He's asleep?" Her voice was raspy from holding back tears and she really needed a cigarette.

"Yeah." Jonathan took her hand and pulled her down to sit in the chair. "How are you holding up?"

Joyce sighed, exhausted, and reached over to place her hand over Will's. "I was never this much of a mess before, you know? I was...I was a good mom, I think. Remember the time we spent a night watching horror movies and he cried and couldn't sleep because of the monster under his bed? I knew what to do then. All the times he fought with Mike? I helped him then. When he had pneumonia? I was terrified, but I didn't fall apart like that. Because, you know, I

knew these things. They were familiar. But then he went missing, and I didn't know anything, and..."

She leaned on Jonathan a little and continued softly, "All this stuff now...real monsters, and Eleven, and the Upside Down...I don't know what any of it is. I'm not in control anymore. I'm scared, Jonathan."

"Me too."

They sat in silence, waiting for Will to wake up, the air thick with worry and woven through with tension. After a while his eyes fluttered open.

"Hey," he said. His lips barely moved, like forming words was too hard. "I'm up. Can I see everyone yet?"

"Yeah! They're all outside, waiting for you to wake up."

For the last few days, Will had barely had any energy. He'd tried to stay upbeat, to smile, so that Jonathan and Joyce wouldn't see exactly how beat down he was (this was hard enough for them already). But he'd been so, so tired, and he felt like bits of the monster's brain were still lodged in his, filling his nightmares with the Upside Down. And it wasn't until now that his face genuinely lit up and he pushed himself up in the hospital bed. He'd been waiting what felt like forever to see his friends.

Nancy and Steve came in first. They both waved, not quite sure how to approach him. He wanted to reassure them, *don't worry. I won't turn into a faceless monster anytime soon*, but he wasn't sure if it was true.

"Hey, little dude. How's it going?" Steve asked. Nancy's eyes wandered over to Jonathan, but he looked down at Will, aware of her gaze but not wanting to return it.

"Pretty good, considering. Thanks for coming, guys." He chatted with Steve for a while about happy, normal things like his art and his favourite movies, and Nancy continued to try and meet Jonathan's eyes. It was never going to be easy with her and Steve and Jonathan, was it? Maybe she was never going to be able to choose one. She

tried to stop thinking about that and struck up a conversation with Joyce.

After a while, they left, and the chief came in to check up on the Byerses and ask them some questions. And after that, it was finally time for Will to see his friends.

Dustin came in first, followed by Lucas, Max, Mike, and someone else, a girl in a pair of leggings and a t-shirt that were a few sizes too big. The first three clamoured around him, shouting his name and asking if he was okay. He nodded and smiled, waving away their concerns.

"Hey, let Mike through," Lucas cut in. Mike came closer to the bed, holding the girl's hand.

"Will...this is Eleven. I don't know if you really got to meet her, but she's back now."

"Hi," Will said, smiling. So this was El. He vaguely remembered her, shaking his shoulder while he lay curled on the ground, barely hearing her because of how hungry and cold and scared out of his mind he'd been. "Thanks. For saving me."

"Don't thank me yet," she said softly. She turned to Mike, who was looking at her like he wanted to get down on one knee and propose. "Can I talk to Will? Alone?"

"Yeah. See you soon, man. Glad you're okay." He left with Dustin, Lucas, and Max. Jonathan and Joyce looked at Will, who nodded, and went out too, leaving Eleven standing in the middle of the room.

"Hey. We've met once, I think, but it wasn't really under great circumstances. What did you - what did you have to tell me?"

She looked him straight in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

She gestured towards him. His skinny, weak frame, his tired face, and the hands that he always looked down at to make sure they were still his. "This. It's the Upside Down."

"Yeah, I figured. And it's not your fault. Do you...do you know what it is?" Will had been pretty much as in the dark as everyone else about what was happening to him. He wanted answers.

To his dismay, she shook her head. "No. But...I'll help you find out. You'll be okay. We'll figure it out together."

He nodded. "Okay. Thanks. Really, thanks."

He let everyone else back in and they all pulled up chairs around his bed, and spent the evening talking about everything and anything to pass the time. Laughing, joking, telling stories. Mike and Eleven held hands, reluctant to let go until Karen came in with a tray of sandwiches.

After a while, Ryan came in.

"Hi, I wanted to see you. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Can I come in?" Will nodded, and Ryan came up to the bed, Dustin and Lucas scooting away to make room. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Yes. And...I don't know. Thanks for coming by."

"How could I not?" Ryan's eyes dart away. To the floor, to the door, back to Will. "Anyway. I should go."

"Wait." With a small exhalation of effort, Will reached up and kissed Ryan on the cheek, something he'd never done before. Both of them went bright red. Will looked around to see the shocked faces of his friends and family. "I was planning to tell you guys, but...some stuff got in the way. I hope you're okay with it."

"Hell yeah!" Dustin shouted, and everyone cheered. "Although how Byers is dating someone and I'm not is a true mystery."

Will felt warmth and acceptance flood his veins as Joyce leaned over to envelope him in a bear hug and Ryan stood there positively glowing with surprise and happiness. Mike and Eleven's hands found each other again, Dustin, Lucas, and Max were clapping, and Karen was tearing up a little.

After it was over, Joyce waved everyone out of the room so that Will

could rest. He really was exhausted. But he was happy, he realized as he settled back into the pillow. Life in Hawkins was far from perfect, but for now, everything was okay. And with some luck, the future wouldn't be too bad either.

So...here we are, at the end. The end was originally going to be around Chapter Eight (although I did modify it quite a bit)...but I realized it would be completely unfair to you guys to leave it at such a cliffhanger. It was a pretty short story and obviously nothing has been perfect, but I think I did okay and I was really happy with the responses I got, especially for my first story! Thank you so so much to everyone who read, reviewed, faved and followed. And if you're reading this after it's been completed, it would also be really cool of you to leave a review, which of course I'll read. I might not be writing more Stranger Things for a while, but if any of you are in other fandoms, I definitely plan to write more in the near future. Anyways...thank you and see you!